Loving God completely

Text: Deuteronomy 6

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**Scriptures:** Mark 12:29-34; Deuteronomy 6

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] Songs Chosen: 155, 25, 417, 501

Series: Deuteronomy (#5)

Theme: As He renews His covenant with the Israelites, who were about to enter the promised land, God calls His people to love Him with reverential fear, wholehearted devotion and willing service so that they would receive the blessings of His grace.

 Loving God completely is the willing response of all who know His love.

**Introduction**

Have you ever had the experience of being out in the New Zealand bush where you have not been able to see the forest because the trees that are in the way? It’s easy to get lost in the woods if you are not following a clearly marked trail. Sometimes when people who go off track can end up walking around in circles for days. One tree looks very much like another! A good way to get your bearings is to climb up to a high point above the tops of the trees so that you can see the whole forest. We have an expression in English which relates to this experience. It is that ‘*someone can’t see the wood for the trees*’. This phrase means to be so focused on the details that you can’t see the big picture; in the case of trees, not being able to view the whole forest.

This is a risk for us in seeking to understand God’s will. Remember the stern rebuke which Jesus gave the ‘experts’ in the Old Testament law: "*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others*” (Matt 23:23). It’s not that the small details of God’s law are unimportant, but rather that a clear understanding of the ‘weightier matters of the law’ is essential if we are going to ‘see the wood for the trees’.

As Moses spoke to ‘all Israel’ near the eastern border of the Promised Land, God was renewing His covenant with His people who were largely the 2nd generation of Israelites. Most of them had been born in the wilderness during the previous 40 years. The Lord is preparing His people to enter the hostile territory of Canaan. The residents there would not receive them warmly because the Israelites would capture ‘great and good cities which they did not build’ themselves, together with wells, vineyards and olive trees (6:10-11). There would be physical opposition to their invasion – wars which the Lord will win for them. There would also be spiritual opposition to Israel whose living God is completely unlike the dead gods of the nations (e.g. Deut 4:39).

In his extended sermon, which makes up almost all of the book of Deuteronomy, Moses repeats for this second generation the detailed law of God for Israel. We’ll look in some detail at these ‘statues and rules’ found in chapters 12-26 of Deuteronomy in a few weeks’ time. These cover practical aspects of living for Israel including:

* Worship, sacrifice, cleanness, judges, kings, the priesthood and prophets
* Conduct in war, purity and honesty
* The giving of first fruits and tithes

In all this detail, The Lord God, speaking through His servant Moses, does not want His people to lose sight of **the chief principle which governs His relationship with them**. The central, foundational law which underpins all others is found here in what is known, especially to Jews, as the ‘Shema’. Shema is the Hebrew word translated in Deuteronomy 6:4 as ‘Hear’. As we saw a few weeks ago from chapter 5 (v1), the word ‘Hear’ means much more than simply listen with your ears open. Shema essentially means ‘listen so that having heard you obey’.

The fundamental law for God’s people for all time is revealed here: "*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might*” (Deut 6:4-5). Keeping this command central in their thinking, in their daily lives at home and elsewhere would enable the Israelites to ‘see the wood as a whole’, as they moved forward in life also carefully observing, as it were, the individual trees which make up the entire forest. For you and me, in our lives, keeping this command central is the most important thing of all as Jesus clearly taught in Mark 12:29 because it is all about loving God completely.

We’re going to look at this chief commandment under three headings:

1. Fear the Lord
2. Love the Lord
3. Serve the Lord
4. **Fear the Lord**

We are all familiar with fear to a greater or lesser extent. Common human fears include social anxiety, fear of heights, bugs, snakes or spiders, enclose spaces, flying, the dark, sickness, blood, violent weather and dying. We are prone to fear the unknown and the possibility of personal failure. When we are fearful, we may experience a range of emotions including dread, fright, alarm, anxiety and terror. We become fearful when we anticipate danger – real or imagined. Fear is helpful in situations where we are in actual danger. For example when a large earthquake strikes, or if we are in the path of a speeding oncoming vehicle or being chased by someone who intends to harm us. Fear causes our well-designed bodies to produce adrenaline which prepares us for ‘fight or flight’. We understand this kind of terrified fear. Within our relationships, either with one another or with God, this kind of fear is not compatible with love.

However, for us loving God is fundamentally different from loving other people because, whilst we are made in His image, He is utterly unique. His ways are not our ways (Is 55:8). This reality is expressed in the words of the great commandment: “*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God,* ***The LORD is one***” (Deut 6:4).

The Lord is set apart from all else ‘*there is no other beside him*’ (Deut 4:35). Therefore*,* a good and necessary awe and reverence for the One Living God is part of the great commandment to love him. As Moses teaches the people this commandment ‘*that you may fear the Lord your God*’ (Deut 6:2).

To fear the Lord is to acknowledge in our lives that He is almighty and that He is not to be treated lightly for He is Holy and perfectly glorious in all that He is and all that He does. C.S. Lewis captured something of this necessary fear of God in his fictious work ‘The Chronicles of Narnia’. In one chapter, Mr. Beaver describes the Christlike King the Lion called ‘Aslan’. Mrs Beaver notes that “*If there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than most or else just silly*.” Lucy then asks, “*Then he isn’t safe?*”. “*Safe?*” said Mr. Beaver. “*Don’t you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? ’Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you*.”

The Lord God is good, but He is not ‘safe’. He is a consuming fire, a jealous God (Deut 4:24). Job, a godly man who is described as being ‘blameless and upright’ turning away from evil was ‘*one who feared God*’ (Job 1:1). Job knew that the ‘*fear of the Lord is wisdom and that to turn away from evil is understanding*’ (Job 28:28). The fear of God has been described by the late pastor and author A.W. Tozer as ‘astonished reverence’ which is mixed with ‘love, fascination, astonishment, admiration and devotion’.

For the person who loves God, to fear Him (in the words of another pastor and author, Ray Ortlund) is ‘*not a cringing dread before the Lord. It is not a guilty “Oh no, here comes God. I’m in for it now.” The fear of the Lord is openness to him, eagerness to please him, humility to be instructed by him (Prov 15:33). The fear of the Lord is a willingness to turn from evil and to change (Job 28:28). The fear of the Lord is surrender to his will (Gen 22:12). The fear of the Lord is one way we love him (Deut 6:2,5)’*

Our fear of the Lord is to be an exclusive fear. When we fear God, we have no need to fear anybody else (e.g. Matt 10:26-32). It was the Lord alone who brought the Israelites out of the land of Egypt, the house of slavery (Deut 6:12). Therefore, as Moses explains ‘*It is the LORD your God you shall fear*’ (Deut 6:13). The people of Israel were not to fear their enemies, the inhabitants of the Promised Land. Neither were they to fear the ‘gods’ of these nations. Moses reminds the people who were gathered listening to his last sermon: “T*he LORD showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household, before our eyes*” (Deut 6:22). A God who is able to supernaturally and spectacularly deliver His people from bondage to freedom is worthy of reverence and awe.

To fear God is His will for His people. He desires that we would fear nobody else (e.g. Gen 15:1; Ps 27:3; Matt 10:31; 2 Tit 1:7). So we can confidently say, *"The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?"* (Heb 13:6). Brothers and sisters in Christ, there is great comfort and security in the fear of the Lord!

However, the person who does not know God is the person who does not fear Him (e.g. Luke 23:40) of whom it is true that "*there is no fear of God before their eyes*" (Ps 36:1; Rom 3:18). (Not fearing God has been described as ‘practical atheism’).

The right relationship of man to God includes fearing Him because this covenant bond is not between equals (e.g. Isaiah 55:8-9). This truth is expressed in Psalm 25:14 “*The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him, and he makes known to them his covenant*”. We seek to reflect a right fear of the Lord in our worship services here as we reverence and praise His awesome name and focus on His glory and majesty – because we love Him. Which brings us to our second point:

**2. Love the Lord**

Just as we all know something about the experience of fear, so we will all likely have an understanding of love. Human love has been defined as ‘a deep affection for someone’ and as an ‘extreme feeling of attachment, affection and need’. However, these dictionary definitions fall far short of the nature and depth of true love.

The full scope and glory of love is not easy to grasp and yet love is frequently referenced in Scripture. The Hebrew word which is translated ‘love’ in our text is used in Scripture for:

1. The love of God for His people (Deut 4:37; Hos 3:1)
2. The love of people for God (Exo 20:6; Ps 116:1)
3. The love of people for others (Gen 29:32; Ruth 4:15)

In this most important commandment God calls His covenant people to love Him: "*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall* ***love the LORD*** *your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might*” (Deut 6:4-5). This is the great commandment which Jesus quoted as recorded by Mark: '*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength*.' (Mark 12:29-30).

Notice that instead of ‘all your might’ as in Deut 6:5, Mark has ‘all your mind and all your strength’, as does Luke, but with strength before mind in his gospel (Luke 10:27). Whereas Matthew records ‘all your mind’, but not ‘all your strength’. These minor differences are helpful in emphasising the fact that this commandment in Deuteronomy 6 is not so much an ‘anatomy’ of which parts of our being we are to love God, but conveys the central truth that we are to love God with the entirety of all that we are. We are to be fully and completely devoted to Him.

As we have already seen with the Ten Commandments our willing obedience to God is to be our **response** to His love. This great love with which He loves (Eph 2:4) is made most evident in His deliverance of His people from slavery into freedom.

**Just as** the ten commandments cannot be rightly understood apart from these Word of the Lord in Deuteronomy 5:6: "*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery*”, **so** the call to love the Lord God with every element of who we are, body and soul, cannot be understood apart from God’s steadfast faithful, freedom-giving love for His people. “*We love because he first loved us*” (1 John 4:19).

Above all God’s love is decisive. It is revealed in action. God **first** chose His people by ‘*setting his love on them*’ (Deut 7:7) He then delivered them from the house of slavery in Egypt because, as He reminds Israel in Deut 7:8, ‘*He loves you*’. God’s love for Old Testament Israel foreshadows His love for all those people He has chosen to love from before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4).

God’s love is **decisive,** and it is also **selective**. He does not choose to love everyone by rescuing them from sin and death.

Why does God choose to love some and not others with His saving love? That is the question raised in Romans 9, where Paul quotes Malachi (1:2-3) “*Jacob I have loved, but Esau I hated*”. God’s choosing does not depend on anything that He finds in those He loves (Deut 7:7-8). His choice entirely and exclusively depends on His sovereign will to show mercy to some, but not to others (Rom 9:18).

God’s love is seen most clearly, most gloriously, and most powerfully in His work of deliverance in Christ. "*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life*” (John 3:16). The decisive love of God is seen in the action of Christ who resolutely went and laid down His life for His bride, the church (Eph 5:25).

We see in the person of Christ that the love of God is not merely a love of action, but also of deep emotion. "*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!*” (Matt 23:37).

**Just as** the love of God is first and foremost seen in action, but is most certainly not without emotion, **so** our love for God is evident first and foremost in action from which emotion does follow. In a Christian marriage a husband and wife commit to one another to act in one another’s best interests for ‘as long as they both shall live’. Sometimes in marriage feelings of love can diminish after a time, or for a period, but those who understand the marriage covenant know that love is first and foremost a decision to act. The good actions in a marriage which demonstrate love are those that we find in God’s Word. Emotions of love generally, but not always, follow.

Emotions are a good gift from God, but they are not a reliable guide. You may not feel a great love for God today with all of your being, but you can decide to act in ways which demonstrate a love for Him. Jesus said, "*If you love me, you will keep my commandments*” (John 14:15). The devoted love which God calls us to have for Him, as the one who has rescued us and gathered us to Himself, finds expression first and foremost in our willing obedience to Him, which brings us to our third point:

**3. Serve the Lord**

We have all likely experienced fear and love, but also service. We may be served by someone behind a counter in a shop or by a person who brings us food in a restaurant or café. Most young children help in the home by doing chores which benefit the whole family as part of their service. Many adults serve others in their place of work or vocation.

In our text, Moses says “*It is the LORD your God you shall fear, Him you shall* ***serve*** *and by his name you shall swear*” (Deut 6:13). Serving God is the outward expression of our inward, ‘all of our being’, devotion to Him in love. Inner, deep-seated loving devotion to God spills out into every area of life at all times: in the house, on the street, when lying down or rising up (Deut 6:7). In his sermon, Moses explained to the Israelites how the commands of God should direct their actions, views and home life in these words: “*You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house*” (Deut 6:8-9).

These words were never intended to be interpreted literally as many Jews have done in making physical ‘frontlets’ or phylacteries. (These are small containers enclosing a parchment on which a number of biblical verses are written). Similarly the reference to writing the command to love God entirely on the ‘doorposts’ has led some Jews to place a small box at the entrance way to their house containing a parchment with scripture verses. Taking the literal ‘letter of the law’ can result in great error. This has led many either down the deceptive path of legalism which is not wholehearted loving devotion to the Lord. Some have followed a mystical view of responding to God – like having boxes containing scriptures as kind of magic talisman. The essence of serving God is not about rules, regulations, traditions or thinking that the physical Bible you have is somehow magic paper and ink.

We can better understand the meaning of serving God by looking at the Hebrew word translated ‘serve’ in verse 13. This word literally means to work. It is translated in the Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint) in some places with a word which conveys the sense of worship. The close connection between serving God and worshipping Him alone is clearly revealed in Romans 12:1-2: “*I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship*”. The word ‘worship’ here also means service.

Now let’s put this all together: Our wholehearted love for God (which is to be our response to His action in which he first loved us) is to flow out into our worship of Him. The phrase in verse 13 ‘*by his name you shall swear’,* means that we are to swear allegiance to the Lord above everybody and everything else. He is to be our first love, our main love. Our deep seated, all-encompassing inner love for Him is to govern all that we think, say and do. Our loving worship of Him is to be reverent – as when we gather for a ‘worship service’ like this.

Our loving worship of Him is to extend into every single aspect of our lives in every moment of our days. Our loving worship of the Lord is to be expressed with all that we do in our homes – teaching any children we have living with us what it is to love the Lord. Our loving worship of the Lord is to be expressed everywhere we go. Our loving worship of the Lord is to be expressed with all that we look at – rejoicing in the goodness of His Creation, turning our eyes away from evil. The great commandment to love God includes the truth that all of life is worship. All of life is service to the Lord. All of life is the realm in which our inner love for God is visible on the outside.

The Israelites were called to fear, love and serve the Lord their God because they were the people upon whom He had first set His love, rescuing them from their helpless state as slaves. Too often they forgot what bondage was like and wanted to go back to where they had come from, ‘*like a dog that returns to his vomit*’, to use the graphic language of Proverbs 26:11. For you and me, brothers and sisters, we may forget what was like not to know the Lord, to be bound up in sin, guilt, shame, hopelessness and a relentless, ultimately unfulfilling search for satisfaction and happiness.

When Christ wrote to the church in Ephesus, He said ‘*I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first*’ (Rev. 2:4). Are you someone today who has abandoned your love for God? Are you someone today who struggles to feel love for God? Are you someone today whose heart, soul and mind are cold towards the Lord, wrestling with doubt, in turmoil within you? Are you someone who has never known the love of God in your life? Are you someone who knows that you should love God, but you feel like you are failing and that you just can’t seem to do enough?

Whoever you are, Jesus calls you today to come to Him. He calls you to believe in Him as your Lord and Saviour. He has fulfilled this most important command for all of God’s people so that we who are in Him, can begin to love Him, to love God with all our heart, soul and might. Whatever the condition of your inner being is today, Jesus calls you: **“***Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light*." (Matt 11:28).

Come to Him, love Him, if you have done so then know that He has loved you first. He has fulfilled not only the great commandment on your behalf, but all the other ones too. Know that He has paid for all the times when you have broken the most important commandment (and all the other ones too) so that you can know the love of God and be enabled more and more to respond to his love by fearing, loving and serving God with all that you are in every circumstance and situation of your life.

Follow Christ as your Lord and Saviour, trusting in Him and obeying His Word and you will be able to see ‘the wood for the trees’ and keep ‘the main thing the main thing’. There is no better way to live than this.

AMEN.